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Discourse Theory on Ideas and Policy Reform: the Case of the Life Course Arrangement

Abstract

How do new policy ideas enter the dominant policy discourse and how do they manage to change these discourses and policy practices? Béland and Cox (2010) argue that most ideational analyses of changes are agency-centered, which means that changes result from people's choices, which are shaped by the (intersubjective) ideas they hold. This paper, however, draws on poststructuralist discourse theory, which, instead of assuming the existence of real intransitive agents and structures with causal powers, is based upon the idea of radical contingency of objectivity. Using this theoretical perspective, two purposes are being served. On the one hand, this study further develops discourse theoretical poststructuralist concepts as methodological tools for policy analysis. On the other hand, by applying these concepts to the case of the introduction of individual savings arrangements in the Dutch collective social security system, this paper offers a refreshing perspective on processes of policy change and permanence.

1. Introduction

In 2006 the Life Course Arrangement (LCA), a fiscally facilitated individual savings instrument for the financing of leave, was introduced in Dutch social security law. The adoption of the LCA, as well as the amendments proposed thereafter, shows that the idea of individual savings accounts for social risks has become firmly established within the Dutch policy discourse. These developments are, however, puzzling in the context of the long Dutch tradition of collective social security arrangements, which seems to confirm the well-known new institutionalist claim that social security institutions tend to remain stable during long periods of time (Pierson 2001). Moreover, the argument has been put forward, especially with respect to corporatist societies like the Netherlands, that labor unions tend to impede major social reforms (Hemerijck & Visser, 1997; Kuipers, 2004).

A plausible explanation for emerging ruptures in the collective social insurance system is offered by scholars in the field in ideational analysis, who argue that the availability of new ideas may cause existing structures to alter (Cox, 2001; Hay, 2002; Blyth, 2002; Schmidt, 2002). How then, according to ideational theory, do new ideas such as the notion of individual savings arrangements actually change existing institutional structures? First of all, it must be noted that there are several ideational approaches, varying from rational choice based ideational approaches to constructivist ideational approaches (Gofas & Hay, 2008). Yet, as Béland and Cox (2010) have argued, what most ideational analyses of changes share is that they are agency-centered.:

“[w]hat things change and how they change are all the result of what people choose to do in response to the world in which they find themselves (...) these choices are shaped by the ideas people hold and debate with others. These ideas, in turn, are based on interpretations people have of the world and of those around them”

(Béland and Cox, 2010, p.12).

To be successful, an idea “[t]he idea must capture the attention of actors who advocate for it and successfully use it to influence the observed outcome” (2010, p.13). Béland and Cox thus foreground the role of intentionally acting agents.

Scholars in the field of ideational analysis also point at some unsettled issues in this field of policy analysis. In the first place, while ideational analysis may decouple ideas from interests, it still cannot adequately explain *why* policy actors identify with those new ideas (Hay 2010). A second, related problem is that ideational analysis cannot explain how ideology affects people’s choices, since this impact is not measurable (Béland & Cox 2010). Thirdly, as Schmidt (2008) argues, it often remains unclear how policy actors move from ideas to action. She therefore urges that more attention is given to collective and structural processes to explain the process of policy change and permanence. Nevertheless, following philosophers like Searle and Habermas, Schmidt still foregrounds the role of intentionally acting (situated) agents who seek to enforce changes through discourse.

This focus on intentionally acting agents struggling with ideas has been challenged in poststructuralist approaches to policy analysis. For example, Finlayson (2007) holds that ideational analysis has wrongly examined ideas instead of arguments, since it views argumentation strategies or rhetoric as merely instrumental to policy goals. Instead, he has argued for an analysis of the constitutive function of rhetoric. Others have pointed at the role of fantasy in the process of policy change and permanence (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). This paper suggests that discourse theoretical solutions for the aforementioned issues in ideational analysis make it possible to explain *why* actors identified with certain new ideas and *how* these ideas were sedimented within existing social structures. In this respect this paper also challenges the claim Hay’s that “postmodernist perspectives (...) largely disavow[s] explanation as the privileging of one subject position over others” (2011, p.171).

As shown below in the account of the adoption of the LCA, poststructuralist approaches to policy analysis offer a refreshing perspective on policy analysis in that they focus on

the constitutive role of rhetoric, subconscious identification processes, and the role of conflict and resistance in processes of change and permanence.

An outline of discourse theoretical approaches is provided in next section. The first empirical sections, sections 5 and 6, show how a new perspective emerged in the Dutch social security discourse: the life course perspective. Section 7 examines how in an atmosphere of conflict, disagreement and compromise, these new ideas ultimately resulted in a political decision on the establishment of the LCA. The last empirical sections (8-10) reveal how, despite the continuous struggles and conflicts in the policy process, the idea of an individual savings arrangement managed to take root in the social policy discourse.

2. Discourse theoretical approaches to change

Let us first consider the discourse theoretical distinction between the *ontic* and the *ontological* level of analysis. The *ontic* refers to a particular domain, phenomenon or discourse, which is understood as an “articulatory practice” that establishes relationships “among elements such that their identity is modified” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, p. 105). The *ontological*, in contrast, refers to the categorical preconditions for such objects and their investigation. That is, in order to understand processes of change and permanence we should first study the *ontological* preconditions of the objects. As Glynos and Howarth (2007) argue, on a micro level of analysis the study of rhetoric can be helpful to gain an understanding of these categorical preconditions, because rhetorical patterns “shape our language use and meaning in non-conscious ways” and, accordingly, give shape to the *ontological* preconditions of the *ontic* objects (Glynos & Howarth 2007, p. 75). This implies that rhetoric is not merely instrumental to policy goals or ideas, but itself can be constitutive of new ideas (Finlayson, 2007).

Norval’s concepts of “aspect dawning” and “aspect change” shed further light on the relationship between rhetorical arguments and the constitution of new ideas. She uses Wittgenstein’s example of the rabbit/duck picture to explain her point. The moment in which a subject suddenly discovers a picture of a rabbit, which she earlier regarded as a picture of a duck, is what Norval calls “aspect dawning;” unexpectedly, the subject has discovered a new aspect. This is a moment of surprise: Now it is a rabbit! At the same time, however, the subject notices that the picture has not changed. In other words, in the new perspective, continuity and discontinuity occur. This is what Norval calls “aspect change”: seeing the duck now differs from the moment before the rabbit was discovered (Norval 2007). Rhetorical moves may thus, within a general frame of continuity, cause people to see things in different ways and generate change accordingly.

Discourse theoretical studies use the concept of *dislocation* to explain changes on the level of the state. *Dislocationary moments*, may include the effects of an economic crisis, processes of commodification, bureaucratization or globalization (Laclau 1990, pp. 52-65). According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the experience of a *dislocationary event* causes subjects to see the contingent basis of sedimented social practices. The subject suddenly realizes that things are not necessarily the way they seem. As a result, signifiers are no longer fixed to a particular meaning and begin to float. These floating signifiers

are only partly stabilized when they are successfully incorporated into dominant discourses, capable of a new fixation of meaning.

Yet, as Glynos and Howarth argue persuasively, a dislocation does not necessarily generate change. That is, change can only be expected if a brief glimpse of the contingent basis of social practices causes people to challenge (the norms underlying) social practices (2007, pp. 121-124). In this situation equivalential chains between different particular demands can be constructed against the current *hegemonic regime*. As a result, this regime may be overthrown and a new *hegemonic regime* is established. For example, during Thatcherite populism the antagonisms constituted around dislocatory processes of bureaucratization were constructed around two poles: the people, which included everyone defending traditional family values and the freedom of enterprise, and their opponents: the state and their subversives such as feminists, blacks and young people (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, p.170). In contrast to these *logics of equivalence*, the *logics of difference* seek to keep different elements separate and autonomous, causing relatively small institutional changes (Glynos & Howarth 2007, pp. 141-145). The logics of difference dominate when different demands are fulfilled such as, for example, in the modern welfare state (Laclau 2005, p. 78). Still, as Laclau argues, within a hegemonic regime we can find both logics of equivalence and difference.

In recent years, insights drawn from Lacanian psychoanalytics have been added to the interplay between logics of equivalence and difference. Discourse theoretical scholars argue that *fantasies* are essential to the process of social change, because they sustain existing or emerging discourses. In this view, the subject identifies with new fantasies because he or she is an internally split subject and constantly seeking new fullness (Stravarakakis, 1999; Laclau, 2005; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Glynos and Howarth mention two kinds of fantasmatic dimensions in policy narratives: the “beatific dimension” of *fantasy*, which “promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome,” and the “horrific dimension” of *fantasy*, which “foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable” (2007, p. 147). In some instances the logics of *fantasy* are closely related to political demands. For example, the *logics of equivalence* may create ontological links between different demands through the construction of an enemy within, such as “the Muslim minorities.” The construction of the *logics of difference*, on the other hand, can be sustained by a *fantasmatic narrative* in which an enemy without is created that takes away the national identity, such as “globalizing forces.”

Hence, discourse theorists as Glynos and Howarth hold a different concept of the subject than scholars in the field of ideational analysis. Most important, they do not, as most ideational scholars, assume the existence of agents as real intransitive objects with causal powers. Although they agree with interpretive scholars that social agents always find themselves “thrown into” a system of meaningful practices (Bevir & Rhodes 2005), for them, structures can never fully determine the identity of these agents, because structures are always incomplete. According to Glynos and Howarth, then, “the whole point of poststructuralists theories of language and human subjectivity is to problematize the idea of a fully-present subject *and* a fully constituted linguistic structure” (2007, p. 78). By

deconstructing the opposition between structure and agency, Glynos and Howarth centralize the role of power and ideology with respect to the (always “lacking”) constitution of social structures and new forms of life.

In summary, Glynos and Howarth spotlight the (unawareness of the) *political* moment inherent in the identification with new ideas that constitute new regimes of practices. At a macro level of analysis the emergence of new hegemonic regimes is primarily caused by a *dislocationary event* followed by the construction of new *chains of equivalences and differences*. At a lower level of analysis change may occur because rhetorical forms in which new ideas are presented cause subjects to experience the contingencies of existing *hegemonic practices*. For example, according to Norval policy change is, above all, conditioned upon a first moment of surprise in which, due to new rhetorical forms, the same things are seen in a different way. Yet on both levels of analysis *fantasmatic* identifications with those new ideas determine the speed and the direction of new policies. Thus foregrounding the role of the political and the ideological, the constitutive role of power relations is at the heart of discourse theory.

3. Methodology

The empirical sections present a historical narrative on the establishment of the idea of individual savings arrangements in the Dutch policy discourse. For the purpose of this narrative, the rather abstract discourse theoretical concepts were operationalized in a specially designed four-step research method. In a first step I formulated the following guiding questions:

1. How can former and new social law practices and discourses be characterized?
2. How and why were these new practices and discourses installed?
3. Why was there a lack of resistance of political subjects who embrace other values, such as solidarity and equality?

In a second step almost 40 key actors in the policy process were interviewed, including (former) ministers, political representatives, representatives of social partners, officials and political advisors. These semi-structured interviews were completed with the readings of secondary literature. The interviews and the readings were, in the first place, helpful for the characterization of social law practices and discourses and the presence of fantasmatic narratives. Among other things, they revealed the impact of the introduction of the signifiers “life course” and “life course perspective” on the social security discourse. The three most influential documents referring to these signifiers were selected for a textual analysis. The interview data also served to guide the selection of another 8 texts for textual analysis. Finally to study the discursive change within the most powerful political party, 4 additional texts were selected for textual analysis.

The third step involved the analysis of the selected texts. Unlike Glynos and Howarth, who did not themselves develop methodological tools for textual analysis, I examined discourse analytical tools developed in other approaches. The methodological tools developed for the purpose of Historical Discourse Analysis (DHA) seemed especially useful in this respect (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart, 1999). DHA entails detailed

study of texts. Every claim made in a text needs to be studied and categorized and DHA formulates a number of heuristic questions. Of these, the following three were of interest to this study:

1. How are people, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically (strategies of nomination)?
2. What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes (strategies of predication)?
3. What arguments are employed in the discourse in question (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009: 93)?

Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl & Liebhart (1999) use the third heuristic question to analyze the construction of national identities. They distinguish between strategies of justification, strategies of construction, transformative strategies and strategies of dismantling. For the present study these analytical categories were adapted to the structure of the analyzed texts.

Together with the data from the interviews and the analysis of secondary literature, the (textual) analysis of argumentative strategies was also helpful, to figure out the 'beatific' or 'horrific' dimension in the narratives. I took the presence of incompatible elements as a rule of thumb to trace the fantasmatic dimensions in those narratives.

In a fourth step I analyzed the social conflict that preceded the establishment of the LCA for the ways different identities (social groups) were either connected or kept separate. As such I sought to figure out how *chains of equivalences and difference* affected existing discourses and practices.

4. Policy context

The Dutch political system can be characterized as consensual, meaning that power over political decisions is distributed among different political party coalitions. After World War II, the CDA (hereafter: Christian democrats) has been a constant presence in governing coalitions. Between 1994 and 2002, however, the Christian democrats were in the opposition and the Netherlands were governed by the other two important political parties - the PvdA (hereafter: social democrats) and the VVD (hereafter: liberals) - and the relatively small D66 (hereafter: liberal democrats). During their time in opposition, the Christian democrats refurbished its political position. One of these, based on the life course perspective and proposed in 2001 was a new social security system that was partly collective and partly based on individual savings. When the Christian democrats returned to power in 2002 as the largest party in the government coalition, they sought to actualize their proposed life-course-based social system. In 2010, after four subsequent governmental coalitions dominated by the Christian democrats, the Balkenende IV cabinet was succeeded by a coalition between the Christian democrats and the liberals headed by the liberal leader Rutte.

The Dutch political system has also some corporatist elements. The influence countries labor unions and employers organizations is channeled in two important ways. First, the

government must consult the tripartite Social Economic Council (SER) on every important socio-economic policy change. Second, twice a year the social partners united in the Labor Foundation discuss the terms of employment for the coming year with the central government. The most important labor unions are the FNV (hereafter: social democratic labor union) and the CNV (hereafter Christian labor union), of which the social democratic labor union is the largest by far. The largest employers' organization is VNO-NCW (hereafter: employers' confederation).

5. The emergence of the idea on the “life course perspective”

The Dutch social security has changed over the last few decades, slowly transforming itself from a system informed by notions of equality and solidarity to a system increasingly influenced by the values of freedom of choice and individual responsibility. Since the mid-1990s, in addition to the individual responsibility discourse, the Dutch social security system has increasingly been affected by discourses celebrating the introduction of marketization processes. These dominant discourses were challenged, however, by counter discourses that objected to the increasing infiltration of the logic of the market into the social system. Other counter discourses emphasized the misrecognition of the worker as a ‘worker with care tasks’. Within this antagonistic field of dominant discourses and counter discourses, a new discourse coalition emerged around the theme of the “life course perspective.” By discourse coalition I mean, following Hajer (1995), “a group of actors that, in the context of an identifiable set of practices, shares the usage of a particular set of storylines over a particular period of time”(p. 70).

Coming together just after the turn of the century, the actors of the “life course perspective discourse coalition” shared a set of storylines that gave expression to the idea that in our current day and age all people, women in particular, are combining more and more activities in their lives. As a result, there is a need for more flexibility and possibilities to take a break, especially during “life’s rush hour” when parents combine different tasks: taking care of their children and their own parents, making a career for themselves, and engaging in training and education. This discourse coalition included the Christian democrats, the social democrats, the liberal democrats, supporters of family policy and feminists. The socialist and Christian labor unions also supported this new idea. For the Christian labor union, the life course idea fitted in well with its affiliation with a family friendly social policy. For the socialist labor union, on the other hand, the new concept of the “life course perspective” not only expresses its new attention to the position of female workers, it also facilitated the shift towards individual responsibility, which had started in the mid-1990s.

A Discourse Historical Analysis of a selection of key texts in the discourse on social security reform from 2001-2002 shows that the new signifiers “life course” and “life course perspective” established a new world view in this discourse: the world was now interpreted in terms of either “standard” or “modern” life courses. Whereas “standard life courses” were associated with “traditional”, “the past” and “static”, “modern life courses” are related to words such as “dynamic”, “free choice” and “change”. Other key signifiers in the studied texts, such as “risk” and “social security”, became meaningful in relation to these new signifiers. For example, “risk” was no longer considered an external event that

could happen to any individual; “risk” was now viewed as an event that is dependent on individual “life course decisions”. Instead of being a new argument in a political struggle over ideas, the study thus suggests that the “life course perspective”, above all, facilitated a new way of seeing. Social security was now perceived in the perspective of an individual life course, which enables the view that individuals can anticipate future events

The data from the interviews support the conclusion that the new way of looking at things provoked enthusiasm amongst involved policy actors. That is, for them, the idea on the “life course perspective” provided a way out of existing, deadlocked discussions on future social security design. Addressing win-win situations, the new signifiers reconciled different, formerly opposing, perspectives: advertising a more relaxed life style on one hand and promoting an increased labor participation on the other; encouraging the (collective) facilitation of more time and money for the caretaking of children on one hand and holding individuals responsible for care tasks on the other (Eleveld 2012).

Participants in this new “life course discourse coalition” formulated diverse designs of a future ‘life course based’ social security system that, above all, responded to the “rush hour of life.” Most designs involved a mix of collective and individual savings, which enabled workers to take time off in order to take care of their children and/or their parents, to take educational leave or to enjoy a sabbatical.

6. Changed ideas: the aging society narrative

After 2002, when the Netherlands was hit by an economic crisis, the discourse coalition altered in important ways. The impact of the economic crisis on governmental policy was clear: the Balkenende II cabinet, a coalition of the Christian democrats, the liberals and the liberal democrats that would soon be named the “reform government”, forcefully argued that the slow economy was seriously threatening the Dutch welfare state. The aging society narrative added to the expressed concerns. According to this narrative, the economic crisis compelled the state to foster a higher and longer labor participation of the citizens to ensure a stable financial basis for the welfare state. This narrative particularly dominated the governmental discourse in the years between 2002 and 2005. In this period the slogan of the Balkenende II government was: “we cannot lose any more time (..) Big efforts are necessary to prevent definite future catastrophes from happening” (Van der Steen 2009, p. 310). In this context, the Balkenende II cabinet presented far-reaching social reforms, among which the gradual abolishment of the fiscal facilitation of early retirement provisions.

The economic crisis and the aging society narrative seriously affected the discursive position of one of its most important *and* most powerful defenders, the Christian democrats. A Discourse Historic Analysis of Christian democrat documents between 2001 and 2005 reveals that in 2001 the “life course perspective” referred to the decreasing quality of life, resulting from the lack of time and money for family life and leisure, whereas a few years later, it was, conversely, invoked to show how people could enhance their labor market participation. This discursive shift also affected the party’s ideas on life course policy. Whereas the Christian democrats had initially designed a partly collective “life course insurance” designed to balance work and family life, in 2004

they argued for a comprehensive individual (savings) arrangement, a precautionary arrangement that encouraged full-time labor participation. It was believed that after a period of 10 to 20 years to reach full maturity, the LCA would become the starting point for an individualized social security system.

The aging society narrative also affected the deliberations between the labor and employers' unions in the SER, which had been asked to design a "life course based social system" some months earlier. As one interviewee reported:

"Instead of talking about workers' desires to take care of family, the discussions in the SER on a 'life course based society' rather addressed the theme of the 'aging society' (...). The general idea was that the collective money that was sunck in existing traditional social security arrangements could be used in a more productive way."

Above all, the discussions in the SER revealed a major controversy between the employers' union, and the social democratic labor union. Although, as argued in the previous section, the social democratic labor union increasingly endorsed "individual responsibility" as one of the basic principles in social security arrangements, the labor union was also afraid to lose "old collective social security rights." Among other things, the union feared that a life course based system will threaten workers' unemployment benefits in the long run. The employers' confederation, on the other hand, which was a strong advocate of further flexibilization and individualization of social security arrangements, supported an exclusively individual savings scheme for the financing of leave. The continuing disagreement between the social democratic labor union and the employers' confederation severely obstructed the proceedings in the SER. In May 2003, the SER deliberations came to an end. According to the official annual report of the SER for 2003, this was due to the reforms announced by the Balkenende II cabinet. Most respondents, however, believed that further SER negotiations were blocked because of the ongoing disagreement between the social partners. Moreover, as will be argued in the next section, the disagreement between two former supporters of the "life course perspective" seems to have been the first sign of a slow dissolution of the "life course perspective discourse coalition."

7. Disagreement, antagonism and compromise

In the summer of 2003, as the economic situation worsened, the government decided to speed up the intended abolition of the fiscal facilitation of its subsidy for early retirement. In addition, the government announced a series of major reforms of public disability and unemployment insurance schemes. Following strong protests from the labor unions, the social partners were allowed to negotiate the conditions for the abolition of the fiscal facilitation of early retirement arrangements and the establishment of the LCA in the Labor Foundation.

The deliberations the Labor Foundation began in the spring of 2004. The social democratic labor union and the employers' confederation having been unable to resolve their earlier disputes, found themselves back in the same antagonistic positions. Moreover, the announced abolition of the fiscal facilitation of early retirement drove the social partners further apart. Whereas the social democratic labor union sought to

preserve the early retirement provisions, the employers' confederation, which shared the fears of a tight labor market, tended to support most of the governmental plans. With negotiations limping along, Minister De Geus of Social Affairs and Employment accepted the labor union's suggestion that workers be allowed to withdraw savings from the proposed LCA to finance early (full-time) retirement. The minister did not, however, give in to the demand of the social democratic labor union to allow workers to save within the LCA on a collective basis. In a later phase, though, he did permit the partial continuation of collective early retirement insurance on the condition that workers were allowed to opt out of the collective insurance scheme. For the unions, however, opting out was not acceptable, because it would destroy the collective system. Since the social democratic and the Christian labor union did not foresee any acceptable agreement, they let the negotiations to collapse. The government, in turn, announced that the reforms would be carried through without consulting the social partners any further.

The labor unions were furious, now that the government had explicitly rejected them from the policy process. As an ultimate act of resistance, they called for a huge social demonstration in October 2004. The labor unions were not the only ones opposing the government. They were joined by a minority of the employers' unions that shared their opinion that the government was increasingly marginalizing the role of the social partners in the policy process. In addition, the unions were joined by all kinds of other groups, including the entire left wing political opposition, which - like the unions - opposed further retrenchments of the welfare state. Calling for a reformed solidarity system, the new chain of equivalences channeled a generally felt anger against the harsh Balkenende government. The call for the mass demonstration encompassed the demands of different groups, such as the demands of those who, like the unions, wanted the collective social security system to be preserved, as well as students opposed to the increase in college fees, refugees and other members of ethnic minorities protesting their social exclusion, tenants, users of public transport, environmentalists and other opponents of the Balkenende cabinet. The formation of a new chain of equivalences was clearly described by van der Braak, a staff member of employers' confederation: "[the announced demonstration] increasingly becomes a political demonstration that can be characterized as a people's front: Left, the labor union and the street against the right-wing government" (2006, p. 85). The establishment of these chains of equivalences thus definitively thwarted the former life course perspective discourse coalition.

Interestingly, the emerging chain of equivalences also seems to have covered up the internal disputes within the social democratic labor union, where a struggle had been going on between (mainly) male staff members defending traditional pension rights and those advocating social reforms that would facilitate female labor participation. Whereas the life course perspective merged the interests of female workers, who wanted to balance work and family life, with the interests of male workers, who were striving for earlier retirement and a shorter work week, the proceedings in the Labor Foundation drove male and female interests further apart. Interviewees reported that female rank and file of the social democratic labor union's in particular disagreed with linking the design of an LCA to the abolition of the fiscal facilitation of pre-pensions. Yet, at the protest march in October 2004 in Amsterdam, which turned out to be the biggest social protest march ever

with 300,000 people marching against the Balkenende II cabinet, the internal differences within the social democratic labor union are set aside. Both male and female staff members reported about the euphoric atmosphere during the protest march and framed it as a successful act of resistance against the government and its individualization policy. Above all, they felt, the protest march put the labor union back on the map.

At the beginning of November 2004, only a few days after the Labor Foundation of new negotiations between the labor unions and the government, the parties come to an agreement. According to the respondents present at the negotiations, the speedy agreement was due to the brute killing of controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist on the second of November. The negotiating parties now realized that they had a common national responsibility and that their mutual quarrels had to be settled. They agreed on some important adjustments to the proposed reforms of the disability insurance as well as on some transitional early retirement provisions and amendments to the proposed LCA, which compensated for the abolishment of the collective early retirement arrangements. The parties decided to introduce an individual savings instrument in the social security law that not only made it easier for workers to accumulate leave time during life's 'rush hour of live', but that also would enable them to compensate for the loss of the fiscal facilitation of early retirement arrangements.

The new agreement was praised extensively in the media channels of the social democratic and the Christian labor union, which both celebrated the outcome of the November negotiations as a triumph for the labor unions. It was as if they had forgotten that most of the reforms of the Balkenende II cabinet were still in effect. According to De Geus, the minister of Social Affairs and Employment, the cabinet decided to let the unions celebrate their victory because the government had finally obtained their approval for further reforms: "We said to each other: 'Okay, let it go, they have the flowers and we have the signatures'" (personal interview, 2009). As a matter of fact, even some interviewed union representatives admitted that the unions' positive framing concealed the fact that the material outcome was not entirely positive for them. However, as they saw things, that was not what mattered. Above all, the protest march had put the labor unions back on the map. The cabinet ministers who had been involved admitted that unions would have been unable to come to an agreement with the government if not for the huge demonstration. The unions, they said, felt more secure after the protest march had taken place: it enabled them to make concessions to the government.

Although the parties had decided that the LCA would take the form of an individual savings arrangement instead of a compulsory collective facility, which would have been the preference of the social democratic labor union, the 2004 compromise marked the start of important efforts by the unions to make a success of the LCA. Many of the collective agreements that were agreed upon in the following years contained specific regulations with regard to the LCA, particularly in support of the elderly workers. One might ask how it was possible for the social democratic labor union to accept a compromise containing elements it had strongly opposed just a month earlier. The present study suggests that the Balkenende government effectively decoupled the different demands by addressing the most important unions demand, even though it was not

included in the call for the demonstration, namely (the idea of) regaining influence in the policy making process. This enabled the government not to give away too much with respect to the other demands. Thus the government successfully cut across the established chains of equivalences and restored the peace in the corporatist society.

8. The LCA: “a monstrous design”

The events preceding the political decision on the LCA, as well as the involvement of other stakeholders in the policy making process, determined to a great extent the final design of the LCA. As seen in the preceding section, the labor unions successfully argued in favor of using the LCA as an early retirement plan. Meanwhile, the Christian democrats paid a price for its new equivalent relationship with the right wing liberals. The chairman of the liberals, Zalm, who served as finance minister in the Balkenende II and III cabinets and a strong opponent of “subsidies on spare time.” only accepted the LCA on the condition that workers not to be allowed to simultaneously participate in the popular “wage savings arrangement”, a condition, as he now admits, that was designed to make the LCA fail (personal interview, 2009). Private insurers were a third stakeholder influencing the final LCA design. In contrast to Zalm and the labor unions, the private insurers supported the ideas of the Christian democrats because they anticipated a profitable market for their product as social security was further individualized and privatized. The Christian democrats, for their part, viewed the private insurers as tactical allies because they could promote the new arrangement in the market.

The details of a future LCA were further elaborated by the Department of Social Affairs and Employment and the Department of Finance. Some officials at the former Department were very disappointed that, compared with the leave plan they had developed a year earlier at the behest of the Balkenende I cabinet, the emphasis had now shifted from a plan that would enable a combination of work and care activities to an early retirement scheme. As they saw it, the underlying idea of the leave arrangement had changed profoundly. Officials at both departments expected the compromise between Christian democrats and liberals to have a negative impact. Officials at the finance department also questioned the government’s interference with private savings in case of market failure, arguing that the fact that workers were not saving for leave simply means that there was no need for it. Perhaps most importantly, almost all interviewed officials said they were rather skeptic about the effects of the LCA on labor participation. Some of them felt that the whole idea of the life course perspective assumed that workers who participated in the LCA would remain longer in the labor market. One of the interviewed officials summarized the discontent as follows: “We all felt that we had to deal with a monstrous design.”

9. Proposed extensions of the LCA and renewed resistance

A year after the introduction of the LCA in 2006 no more than 5% of the workers were saving part of their wages under this arrangement, most of them for the purpose of early retirement. In order to make the LCA more attractive to workers, the new Balkenende IV cabinet decided to integrate the LCA with the aforementioned wage savings arrangement, extended the LCA to the self employed, and allowed participants to withdraw money from the account to finance periods “in between jobs” and the start-ups of a new

businesses. A year later, the Labor Foundation launched similar proposals (The Labor Foundation, 2008). A few months after the Labor Foundation report was published the Labor Participation Committee, which had been organized to advise on labor market reforms, presented a plan for a mixed individual and collective savings arrangement modeled on the LCA, under which periods of unemployment can be financed. The proposed scheme partly replaces existing collective social security arrangements (Labor Participation Committee, 2008).

The same year, the Department of Social Affairs and Employment and the Department of Finance were ordered to design a set of workable options in keeping with the 2007 coalition agreement. Two options were extensively discussed:

1. The LCA would be regulated under the income tax law (instead of the wage tax law) in order to include self-employed workers. People would only be allowed to withdraw money as an income substitute if they chose not to do paid work, but instead dedicated their time to (unpaid) care activities or training activities or if they had to finance a period between two jobs or the start-up of a business.
2. As in the first option, the LCA would be regulated under the income tax law, but there would be no controls with regard to the purpose of withdrawals.

Both options were rejected, however. Not only were they too expensive, they also had too many goals. Some interviewees reported that at that time it seemed as if new goals were formulated constantly being added to an LCA instrument already in existence. First, it had to be tailored to finance leave for care and educational activities. Then it also had to address the demand for a pre-retirement arrangement. Then, under the last proposals, it also had to cover periods of unemployment and help employees to set up their own businesses. One official explicitly blamed the “technocratic hobbyists” for the fruitless departmental discussions: “what had started with a small problem, the reconciliation of work and family life, had grown totally out of control”. In addition, some officials thought it unwise to include the self employed in the LCA, because in their view, the self employed tend to care for themselves by definition. For example, one official said: “Is this really a problem? Can you imagine the streets to be full of people demanding a life course arrangement for the self employed?”

There were also doubts about the second option: Would participants really be willing to save for goals that extended their working life, such as financing leave for the purpose of care and education. As one respondent argued: “Why wouldn’t they use the savings to finance consumer goods, such as a mobile home?” According to these skeptical officials, the proposals no longer had anything to do with the objective of public social insurance.

As a result, despite the intentions of the Balkenende IV cabinet and the advice of the social partners and the Labor Participation Committee, the LCA was not extended for the time being. Apart from objections by officials to the coalition plans, the more ambitious plan of the Labor Participation Committee was opposed by the unions out of fear that it might destroy the existing system of collective social insurance.

10. The future of individual savings arrangements in the social security system

Most of the key actors interviewed in 2009 and 2010 were pessimistic about the future of the LCA. Some of them referred to the technical details of the arrangement, such as the non-accumulation verdict resulting from the compromise between the liberals and the Christian democrats. Other respondents simply did not believe that the LCA could solve the problems of life's rush hour of life or the tight labor market.

Despite the widespread pessimism, the idea of individual savings arrangements in the field of social security did not completely vanish from Dutch policy discourse. After two quiet years the Rutte cabinet, consisting of the Christian democrats and liberals, announced a "vitality plan" based on a new savings arrangement, the "vitality arrangement," that would replace the LCA in 2013. The vitality arrangement was first and foremost a plan that would sustain the longer labor market participation necessary in aging society. Like the 2007 and 2008 proposals, the vitality arrangement allowed workers - including the self employed - to withdraw money from their individual account during periods when unemployed in order to stimulate "the transition from job to job." Since the social partners had launched similar ideas a few years before (The Labor Foundation, 2008), it was no surprise that they supported this proposal, albeit on the condition that would still be possible to use the instrument to finance early retirement.

By the year 2011, thanks to the aging society narrative, the idea of an individual savings arrangement has definitely shifted from an arrangement for the "rush hour of life" to a scheme to facilitate "job-to-job transitions," obviously connecting the idea of an individual savings arrangement with the traditional collective unemployment insurance.

11. A discourse theoretical approach to ideas and policy change

Reflecting on the rhetorical redescription presented in the preceding empirical sections, we now seek to answer our initial question about how and why new ideas on individual savings arrangements affected Dutch social policy.

First of all, we saw that in the 1990s some counter discourses increasingly challenged the existing logics of the social security system (solidarity, breadwinner system, etc.). Put otherwise, a gap seems to have been opened up between the term social security and its meaning. This gap was soon filled up with the terms "life course" and "life course perspective." These terms, like a dislocationary event, facilitated a glimpse of the universal, of another way of doing things. They made people "see things" in a novel way (i.e. aspect dawning). It was easy to identify with these new signifiers, because they responded to a *fantasmatic* demand for a new fullness in a discursive field that was increasingly immersed in counter discourses. As such, the new names united formerly dominant discourses and counter discourses.

In addition, instead of being just one idea, strategically proposed by policy actors, the new terms, in the process of deliberation, came to constitute a new world view, which confirms Finlayson's claim that the process of argumentation cannot be separated from the formation of a consensus. Thus new *rhetoric* changed the categorical pre-conditions of the social security discourse and thus changed existing social security discourse.

Following the 2003 *dislocationary events*, the economic crisis and the announced cutbacks in social expenditure, *chains of equivalences* between different demands were constructed against the hegemonic neo-liberal policy of the Balkenende II regime. This process was sustained by a strong *fantasmatic* aging society narrative, which expressed the fear that the Dutch welfare state would soon become unstable if nothing was done to increase the labor supply. The aging-society narrative profoundly altered the meaning of the “life course perspective” within the context of hegemonic neo-liberal regime, putting the emphasis on individual precautionary measures that would enhance labor participation. Since the former partners in the life course discourse coalition had become antagonists, it is necessary to ask how the adoption of the LCA was achieved.

The study suggests, first of all, that the government effectively decoupled different demands. The unions wanted more than anything to reestablish their position as serious contenders, so they were given credit for the victory in negotiations, as a result of which the government could cut across the established *chain of equivalences* and restore peace in the corporatist society. The working of the *logics of difference* thus allowed the government to go on with its neoliberal program, including the introduction of an individual LCA. Moreover, the working of the *logics of difference* was reinforced by fears about both an aging society and Muslim fundamentalists, which, according to the involved policy actors, necessitated them taking a collective stand for a stable Dutch welfare state. By creating an external enemy, the *fantasy* effectively sustained the *logics of difference* of the neo-liberal government.

On the other hand, the *logics of difference* also seem to have contributed to the failure of the LCA, i.e. the decoupling of demands implied that the government had given in to some of the union demands. For example, the LCA could now be used effectively as an alternative for collective pre-pension arrangements. Acceptance of the liberal demand to maintain the wage savings arrangement as a separate arrangement further weakened the LCA.

Another important factor was the position of policy officials who, positioned themselves as “non-believers,” and hindered any further extension of the LCA. Their “silent resistance” against the *hegemonic* policy regime reveals an ongoing defect of social structures. Their resistance against the construct of the subject as a self-responsible life planner seems to have been supported by the public, as demonstrated by its low degree of participation in the arrangement.

Nonetheless, despite the resistance of both the public and the officials, the idea of individual savings arrangements has been firmly established in the Dutch policy discourse. How did this happen? The poststructuralist discourse theoretical approach answers this question in three steps. First, the “life course perspective” enabled a new way of seeing and, as such, constituted new *social logics*. Social security was now perceived in terms of individual life courses, which opened up the possibility of introducing individual savings arrangements in the traditional collective system of social insurance. Second, the working of the *logics of equivalence* and *difference* secured the

support of the labor unions for this novel arrangement. Third, various forms of (silent) opposition were effectively resisted because identification with a strongly *fantasmatic* aging-society narrative continued to nourish the urge for social reforms.

12. Conclusion

This study shows that a discourse theoretical approach is able to overcome some of the problems raised by ideational analysis. The study reveals, first, how ideas change and why policy actors can identify with the new ideas. It further shows that research should not focus on how policy actors move from ideas to action. In fact, ideas cannot be separated from actions; as illustrated in the preceding account, ideas emerge and change because of the use of rhetoric, discursive interactions, (fantasmatically based) identification processes and the working of the logics of equivalence and difference, processes largely beyond the control of intentionally acting individual policy actors. While the new rhetoric accounted for the conditions of the possibility, the working of the logics of equivalence and difference, ultimately determined what a reformed Dutch social policy would look like. In addition, insights from Lacanian psychoanalytics proved to be helpful in explaining why subjects identified with certain narratives. Thus this study shows how the constitutive role of power relations remain at the centre of a discourse theoretical explanation of policy change.

A question can be raised, however, as to how the discourse theoretical concept of agency differs from the concept of the “situated agent” in interpretive approaches. For example, apart from the fact that discourse theory explains *why* subjects identify with certain narratives, it is not clear how situated agents who identify with a particular narrative, such as the aging society narrative, can be distinguished from the internally split subjects who identify with the same narrative in his/her constant search for new fullness.

The failure of discourse theory to present a full-blown alternative to more conventional approaches to the analysis of policy change, it would seem, is due to the fact that discourse theoretical concepts, despite its empirical ambitions, are mostly presented on a philosophical level of analysis. They are abstract concepts designed for a macro level of analysis. This is, of course, helpful to the extent that the context is dominated by ideology and other macro-level cultural venues, but additional analytical tools are needed to explain why certain policy ideas (and others not) are successful within a relatively small group of policy actors. For this purpose the study recommended the deployment of tools that are developed in the field of Discourse Historical Analysis. Hajer’s concept of discourse coalition also proved to be useful. It explains, above all, how rhetorical moves can encourage the merging of disparate discursive positions in policy discourses. It is hoped that scholarly research will deploy and further develop DHA, the concept of discourse coalition and other (middle range) concepts for the purpose of a discourse theoretical engagement with the study of policy change.

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